29 May 2026

Right to Food – UK Commission UK submission to call for evidence

(to inform the Commission Report, Right to Food legislation roadmap and Action Plan for the UK to make the Right to Food a reality by 2030)

This is a joint submission by Anaka Women's Collective, Gairdín an Phobail, Grow NI, Larder>East, Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) and Source Grow, all of Northern Ireland.

Anaka Women's Collective, based in Belfast, is led predominantly by women with direct experience of the UK's hostile immigration system. Its network of over 450 women and families with 30 different nationalities who use their collective skills to educate, support, advocate and celebrate each other. Grow NI works with the women from Anaka to organise weekly growing and cooking sessions, helping to build connection and provide access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food.

Gairdín an Phobail (GAP – the People's Garden), is located on the site of a community garden initially begun in 2013 by Springhill Community House in West Belfast, an area where chronic poverty goes hand in hand with an abundance of talent and a spirit of community organising best captured by the Irish phrase 'Ná h-abair é, déan é' (don't say it, do it). Re-opened in early 2021 during the pandemic with support from Grow NI and PPR, its focus is to empower communities to divest from activity which harms our ecosystems, by growing sustainable food, rewilding and protecting natural habitats and delivering training to build the skills and resilience to help communities respond to climate change. It is home to a network of dedicated community organisations, youth clubs, schools and residents who together care for the Gairdín and surrounding wild spaces and support local campaigns around housing, mental health and Irish language (BBC documentary link here).

Grow NI is a community gardening organisation that combats the isolation of marginalised groups through safe, shared, socially inclusive growing spaces across Belfast, supporting communities on the edges (geographical and communities of interest) to engage actively with how we as a city feed ourselves in a way that is good for people and good for nature. Grow have stewarded a piece of land on the edge of the Waterworks public park in north Belfast since 2010 and currently also support community growing, cooking and nature-connection at

other 5 other sites across the city including at Larder>East, Gáirdin an Phobail (GAP), Forthspring Intercommunity, Camberwell Court (Newington Housing) and Brink! at Belfast Stories meanwhile space.

Larder>East is a community food hub making high-quality, nutritious food accessible to all, regardless of income. Fresh produce is sourced from local businesses and small producers, including pasture-fed eggs, fruit and vegetables, sourdough bread, and staples such as grains, pulses, rice, and pasta. It promotes healthier diets while reducing waste through its refill model and low-packaging supply chains. Over the past two years, they have strengthened sustainability by increasing local sourcing, reducing food miles, and expanding community initiatives, including a community gardener and a herb clinic offering plant-based support for minor ailments.

Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) is a human rights NGO founded in 2006. PPR supports people to use human rights as tools to fight for economic, social and environmental changes that improve their lives, in the areas of housing, mental health and more.

Source Grow works closely with local growers to provide local people with fresh, affordable produce grown in a sustainable nature-friendly way. It promotes a fairer local food system by buying from local producers at prices set by them and supplying their produce to a network of local customers at a fair cost.

1. Food insecurity in NI

Understanding the nature of food insecurity in Northern Ireland requires a hard look at its context. At first blush, people's access to healthy and affordable food could seem almost guaranteed here: in a land mass of 1.35 million hectares, over three quarters – more than 1 million hectares of NI land -- is farmed, with four out of five of NI's nearly 26,000 farms classified as 'very small'. But the profit-driven, livestock-dominated nature of NI agriculture, in which corporations such as Moy Park Chicken have disproportionate power, gives a very different result.

1a. Context

Agriculture concentrated on poultry and cattle

According to June 2025 figures, only 46,578 hectares (around 4.5% of the farmed land) was used to grow crops; the rest goes to livestock – for domestic consumption, but primarily for export to the rest of the UK and Ireland:

> despite accounting for less than 3% of the UK population, Northern Ireland produces 8% of total UK food output by volume and over 10% by value. This contribution is concentrated in … eggs, milk, beef and veal, and poultry, where Northern Ireland

> consistently supplies between 17% and 20% of total UK production (April 2026 economic impact study by the NI Food and Drinks Association, p. 8)

Moreover, much of NI's limited crop production goes to feed livestock. According to the Ulster Arable Society (2018),

> as a predominately livestock area Northern Ireland has a high demand for cereals and associated products for incorporation into feeding stuff. It is therefore a grain deficit area and imports large quantities of cereals from Ireland and around the world. NI is about 25% self-sufficient in cereals compared to 75% to 90% in Ireland and around 100% in EU (para. 2.3)

To make matters worse, NIFDA reports that the total agricultural area used for crops had fallen by 2.1% year on year from 2023, with potatoes and cereals impacted the most; it remarked, "this divergence reinforces the structural tilt of NI agriculture towards livestock-based production systems" (p. 36). This concentration comes at a high cost, reducing the amount of local produce available for area residents, diminishing food sovereignty and harming long-term soil productivity:

> the combined decline in cropped area and output highlights a structural weakening of tillage within Northern Ireland's agricultural system. This has implications beyond farm-level profitability, including reduced domestic supply of starchy carbohydrates and feed grains, greater import reliance, and fewer rotational benefits for soil and environmental management (p. 36)

NIFDA (briefly) recognises the wider environmental damage caused by the nearly exclusive focus on poultry and cattle, stating "agriculture accounts for a disproportionately large share of Northern Ireland's greenhouse gas and ammonia emissions, reflecting the scale and structure of livestock production" (p. 9). (Perhaps the most visible example of this harm is the frequent bloom of toxin-producing blue-green algae in Lough Neagh – the water source for 40% of NI's population – due in large part to the presence of nitrogen and phosphorous from artificial fertilisers and slurry/manure run-off (NI Water)).

The fact that food poverty has been allowed to take root and persist in this overwhelmingly agricultural region – despite the dominance and productivity of the strong agricultural sector – points to a systemic failure to prioritise local people and their needs over export-driven profit. Rectifying the glaring imbalances here will require targeted, NI-specific responses.

Local food poverty

Around 36 % of NI residents live in rural areas, and some of them can grow or buy fresh local produce at affordable prices; but too many others cannot. The picture is more mixed than might be expected. While the food security challenges facing families in urban, often conflict-affected areas of multiple deprivation are perhaps more well known, academic research published in 2025 found that in NI "spatial variations exist in relation to rural and urban food

poverty, and rural dwellers face greater disadvantage in obtaining nutritionally adequate diets" (p. 1). It added,

> while rural areas suffer greater food poverty risk, urban food poverty exists and in some urban areas, the food poverty risk score is considered to be very high, with pockets of risk occurring along the urban-rural gradient. (p. 10)

Importantly, the researchers highlighted a woeful **lack of local data** to inform NI food policy:

> at present there is currently no established or robust measure, in terms of geographical location, of the structural forces of change that may contribute to food poverty. This means that there are no data in NI on the extent and spatial distribution of the problem of food poverty in rural areas. (p. 2)

It is important to note that this lack of data is a feature across the north; the most recent Multiple Deprivation Measures data was from 2017. More recently, NI's 2021 census did gather limited data as a measure of deprivation, but in four areas only-- education, employment, health and housing – using very broadbrush indicators of 'deprivation'[1]. As UN guidance such as the Human Rights Based Approach to Data (2018) makes plain, up-to-date, detailed data is a prerequisite for informed and effective policy- and decision-making.

The closest approximation to local data are the limited survey results produced by the Food Standards Agency. Its most recent (March 2026) 'Food and You 2' report indicated (p. 62) that 64% of survey respondents in NI reported high food security (a lower proportion than in either England or Wales); 14% reported marginal, 11% low and 11% very low food security. This marks a **deterioration** from the situation described in the first 'Food and You 2' report (p. 9) in 2021, in which 85% of NI respondents reported high or marginal food security and only 15% low or very low food security.

Reliance on food banks and free school meals

In the absence of adequate official data, uptake at food banks and of free school meals has become a stand-in indicator of the level of hunger across the north. In 2023 Trussell Trust NI reported delivering the highest ever annual number of food parcels in Northern Ireland (over 81,000)[2]; while at the same time, the NI Department of Education cancelled its Covid-era school holiday food grant for children from low-income families. By May 2024, Trussell Trust reported that Northern Ireland showed the biggest increase in the number of people accessing Trussell Trust sponsored food banks of all UK regions, more than doubling over the previous five years. A contributing factor is low income: in October 2024 the Nevin Economic

[1] For instance, a household was marked as deprived in housing if it reported that it (1) did not have central heating, or (2) was overcrowded.

[2] Further coverage of Trussell Trust's most recent emergency food distribution report for NI (November 2024) is *inter alia* at https://www.newsletter.co.uk/health/northern-ireland-executive-urged-to-act-on-hunger-as-35000-emergency-food-parcels-distributed-4874421

Research Institute reported (p. 3) that while 14.4% of NI workers were paid below the real living wage in 2022, that had risen to 20.5% in 2024.

By 2025, Trussell Trust reported (p. 6) that NI uptake of emergency food parcels had declined somewhat on the previous year-- but noted that it still exceeded pre-pandemic (2019) levels by 60%.

In 2026 a private member's bill, the Education (Holiday Meals Payment) Bill, was introduced to the NI Assembly, "to address the serious issue of 'holiday hunger' by seeking to secure provision of permanent financial support through direct payments, in lieu of Free School Meals (FSMs), during school holiday periods for those who are entitled". It has not proceeded further.

1b. Challenges in NI

Context

NI's Public Health Agency cites unemployment, high disability and illness rates, low wages and lack of flexible or part-time work as one of the four main reasons for higher persistent poverty in NI as compared to other regions of the UK. March 2026 statistics on **child poverty** across the UK indicated that 20.5% of NI children (or 98, 709 kids) were in 'relative low income' families after housing costs in 2025; over 20,000 children across the north are growing up in households officially recognised as **homeless**. Belfast — which came in around 60th worst of 361 local authorities in the UK- had 18,161 children in relative low income families after housing costs, as well as over 6,000 children living in homeless households. Save the Children NI noted that, unlike elsewhere in the UK,

> the burden on families in Northern Ireland is higher than the headline data because we don't have universal early years childcare, universal free school meals and rents have rocketed 50% in some areas in the last 6 years.

Addressing poverty has not been a government priority in the nearly three decades since the 1998 peace accords (the Good Friday Agreement). The 1998 Act which enshrined the terms of the peace, while imposing some specific equality duties, did not require public authorities to assess the impact of their choices on people living in poverty. Instead it imposed a more general duty, to "tackle socio-economic inequalities" on the basis of "objective need".

It would take legal challenges in 2015 and 2025 before the NI Executive issued an **anti-poverty strategy** as mandated back in 1998. That strategy was swiftly declared unfit for purpose by a host of civil society groups, including Larder>East and PPR; the Executive has yet to respond.

More specifically, evidence gathered by our organisations in the course of their work highlights that certain groups of people are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.

Groups at risk of food insecurity

i/ People living in areas of multiple deprivation

In 2025 Grow NI held three three-hour workshops funded as part of the Belfast Sustainable Food Partnership process, designed to be 'bread and butter' conversations with citizens who are vulnerable to food insecurity: communities experiencing multiple deprivation, people dependent on benefits, older people, people with disabilities, women with young children, carers, people who are homeless or in housing stress, young people and people with experience of the asylum system were all represented. This mix of participants was achieved by working alongside community partners led by and supporting people who have struggled to access healthy food locally.

Issues raised by participants in the West Belfast workshop included:

- Given the high cost of living, people are having to choose between essentials like heating and eating; it often seems easier to buy cheap convenience food.
- Special dietary needs / intolerances / allergies or veggie / vegan are a nightmare on a budget.
- Benefits and minimum wage are not enough to run a household on, emergency food aid becomes an essential part of surviving which is all wrong.
- People living alone – life is even more costly with only one person paying all the bills. It's no craic cooking for one, you end up wasting food or not cooking hot meals every day because of the work involved in cooking, shopping etc.
- Time constraints for working families – end up resorting to fast food and over-processed food.
- Forgotten / never learned skills of cooking & food growing, loss of traditions.
- Transport: buses are expensive, out of the way up here and too far to walk back from supermarkets. If you don't have a car it's hard to do supermarket shop, small shops more expensive.
- Lack of connection to food and nature and with family and community – everyone's living in wee bubbles now which is very sad and makes life more stressful and isolating.
- Capitalism. A radical cultural shift has taken place in our eating habits over the last fifty years to support a highly profitable and destructive international food system.
- Unrealistic standards: people not used to eating less-than-perfect looking produce from supermarket shelves.

To counteract these, they called for training and skills-sharing in how to grow and in foraging; access to public land and spaces as well as public resources for seeds, compost and other materials to encourage community growing, including at schools and nurseries; support for communal cooking, co-operatives and community gardens, markets and farms; and promotion of local greengrocers and organic growers.

Participants in the East Belfast workshop echoed some of the same concerns as the West group, particularly:

- Cost of fresh food is not affordable for people on benefits or low income. If people buy fresh food and it doesn't get cooked then it's money wasted, people less likely to buy fresh food for this reason.
- No space or time to grow own food, especially when you have caring responsibilities. Know-how is also lacking, skills are being lost.
- People living alone: hard to buy small quantities for one so a lot is wasted. It's a lot of work shopping and cooking for one person. It can be lonely & isolating cooking for one all the time, inclined not to bother or to resort to convenience foods / takeaways.

They proposed initiatives to use public and community land for growing and farming; share seeds and growing space; distribute excess grown produce; support co-operatives and farmers markets, including through introducing a barter system; introduce local food growing hubs offering support in the form of compost, manure, seeds and expertise; train and educate children and young people, including through changes to school curricula; support local farmers and growers; foster communal growing, poultry keeping and cooking; and skills-sharing around foraging, seed collection, composting and food preservation.

ii/ People seeking international protection

Amidst growing housing shortage across the north, from mid-2021 the private Mears Group hired by the Home Office to provide asylum accommodation, began placing increasing numbers of people in hotels while their claims were being processed. Here they faced breaches of a host of rights, including around food:

> one of the most difficult issues for hotel residents is culturally inappropriate and inadequate food. Only in one hotel – Camera House in Belfast – are people now given access to the kitchen to cook for themselves. In all other accommodation, set meals are provided three times a day. People are not allowed to cook for themselves; there is no food provided in between meals; and people are not allowed to have food in their rooms. (Some may have access to a kettle, but none have access to a microwave or refrigerator). People with health or dietary issues (such as anaemia, diabetes or dental issues) find the food insufficient. Parents with *babies* find themselves having to go repeatedly to ask for bottles to be heated in the kitchen, for instance. Those with toddlers or older children find that they do not necessarily like the prepared meals, which may include fried or spicy food; and they naturally are hungry between set meal times. Parents struggle to ensure that their diet is varied enough, given the lack

> of a supply of readily available fresh fruit and other fresh food. Parents worry that their children's health and development are being affected.[3]

People of the Muslim faith found access to food to be particularly difficult during Ramadan, when the rigid meals schedule at the hotels conflicted with their fasting; one of the first solidarity actions of the emerging #KindEconomy campaign supported by PPR and Anaka was to come together to cook weekly Iftar meals for this group, to help them celebrate breaking their fast together. (Incidentally, February 2026 research commissioned by Muslim Aid found Muslim adults in the UK to be twice as likely to experience food insecurity as the wider population.)

In the course of 2023, activists in the Lift the Ban and Kind Economy campaigns supported by PPR, and in Anaka Women's Collective, worked with hotel residents to begin their own monitoring and use it to hold local health, education, transport and other authorities to account. They relayed that

> some residents reported waiting between 12 and 14 hours between evening meals and breakfast and having become malnourished and/or anaemic due to poor quality food, including mouldy bread and uncooked chicken served on a rigid schedule. Some parents reported their children were failing to grow or losing weight. In several cases residents reported being hospitalised for treatment, only to be returned to the exact same conditions upon discharge.
>
> Residents reported digestive disorders and high blood pressure, which require flexibility in diet and meal times. However in contingency accommodation residents are not allowed to prepare and cook their own food – despite some asylum seekers, who are also banned from working, being trained chefs. Hotel and Mears staff have on one-off occasion permitted charities to access kitchens for people to cook their own food, but this provision has not been rolled out regularly or across all accommodation.[4]

While the use of hotels as asylum accommodation has since declined in the north – of the 2,608 asylum seekers and dependents here at end 2025, only 268 – around 10%-- were reported in hotel accommodation[5] -- issues remain. Women with experience of the asylum system in NI and participating in the Anaka Women's Collective took part in a workshop organised and facilitated by Grow NI in early 2025, designed as 'bread and butter' conversations with citizens who are vulnerable to food insecurity. They raised issues including:

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[3] https://www.nlb.ie/blog/92/2022-05-accommodating-cruelty-the-use-of-hotels-as-contingency-accommodation-part-two

[4] https://www.nlb.ie/blog/70/2022-10-the-kind-economy-defending-human-rights-a-report-on-the-state-of-health-in-contingency-accommodation

[5] Source https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#asylum table ASY_D09

- emergency accommodation mostly provides no garden space for growing.
- unfamiliarity with the growing environment here
- It is too expensive to buy the foods we like to eat especially if you are surviving on benefits or Home Office asylum support of £49 per person.
- People are relying on food banks which often give us food we are not familiar with instead of things that we can use like lentils, oil, flour, chickpeas.
- Even if we have the money it is hard to know where to find the right foods, you normally need a car or maybe two buses to get to the right shops.
- At home we could often buy directly from growers and farmers and the food was healthy and fresh – here it is all refrigerated and fresh food is unaffordable. Going to a farmers market isn't an option – they are few and far between and too expensive.
- In the asylum system people have no control over where they live: sometimes they are living in hotels where they can't cook their own food and have to eat what they are given, regardless of the quality or whether they like it or not
- All of this means we end up eating food that is cheap, unhealthy and unfamiliar to us. We develop health problems – stomach and gut issues, skin problems and other issues.
- Distance to shops: Halal shops are few, in some areas there aren't any (especially in West and East Belfast). Where there are Halal shops they are really expensive, usually at least double what you pay in supermarkets. It is sometimes two bus journeys to get to a Halal shop, (a day ticket is now almost £5)- this takes time and money so you go maybe once a fortnight or once a month. And if you're going irregularly and buying bigger quantities it is so heavy to carry. Supermarkets sometimes have a selection of Halal and other culturally diverse foods, however it varies greatly and even supermarkets are hard to get to if you don't have a car. It's hard to know which food is Halal if you don't understand the ingredients list.
- It's difficult when you go to supermarkets to know which foods are Halal and which are not – we would love if there was a bigger selection of Halal foods / if foods were labelled as Halal or not.

The women proposed a range of measures in response, including making accessible, affordable and nutritious food a human right available to everyone regardless of income or culture; better access to spices, legumes and halal products; training for how to grow in this climate; support for local growers so that their produce is more accessible and affordable, including through farmers markets; place-based planning that builds in access to land for communal gardens or allotments; introduction of a Halal abbatoir in Belfast to increase supply and affordability; practical support for newcomers in finding shops with culturally appropriate foods and accessing foodbanks if needed; ensuring emergency accommodation

has kitchen access; culturally appropriate school meals, and in-school education around food and growing; and support for collective responses to food challenges.

iii/ Homeless families placed in emergency accommodation in hotels

As mentioned by the women who took part in Grow's workshop with Anaka, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has in recent years increasingly resorted to placing homeless families in emergency accommodation in hotels with **no access to kitchen facilities** due to the north's acute housing shortage.

These newly-homeless people can include individuals who have had to leave home following a relationship breakdown; others who have found themselves evicted after failing to make rent (rents across the north have on average risen by 51% since 2020); and a range of others, including some newly-recognised refugees. Particularly amongst the latter group – who have only recently received the right to work and to apply for Universal Credit and are no longer in receipt of asylum support – feeding themselves and their families in their new circumstances poses a real problem. Almost all hotel settings lack kitchen facilities; some offer hot food, but at prices unaffordable to struggling families – even those already holding down jobs or receiving benefits.

PPR has asked the Housing Executive by Freedom of Information how many households were living in hotels; by FOI Response 702 of 9 April 2025, the Housing Executive reported a total of 464 households in 'non-standard temporary accommodation' across the north's eleven council areas at end 2024. Of these, 72 were families with children.

PPR asked the Housing Executive, via Freedom of Information, how many of the emergency hotels it uses give homeless people access to cooking facilities or refrigerators; how many have an on-site restaurant or other cooked food provision, where food is available to purchase; and how many have neither access to neither. The Housing Executive (FOI Response 695 of 25 March 2025) replied, "the Housing Executive does not hold any records with this information".

The numbers of people recognised as homeless have grown: subsequent data from the NI Statistical and Research Agency indicated that at end September 2025 (the most recent data set publicly available), 5,408 homeless households (with 4,834 children between them) were living in temporary accommodation. A reported 36.5% of these households (or around 1,974 of them) were in hotels or B&Bs.

A year on from PPR's initial FOI request, the Housing Executive was still pleading ignorance – this time to elected officials-- about how many families it was placing in settings with no kitchens:

> the Housing Executive does not record the number of placements in temporary accommodation specifically by access to kitchen and laundry facilities[6].

When directly asked by the same NI Assembly member whether the relevant department had explored options for targeted support of these families, for instance via food vouchers, their answer indicated that they had not[7].

iv/ People living with disabilities

Disability Action's Election Manifesto 2023 noted that one in four people in Northern Ireland are disabled, yet disabled people "continue to experience barriers in accessing housing, transport, employment, education, leisure, health and public services". Its 'Manifesto for Change' said (pp. 2-3),

> life costs more for disabled people and our families. We have always had to spend more on essentials including heating, insurance, and equipment. As the cost of living continues to soar- many of us are facing impossible choices in order to survive and are under severe financial pressure. Many of us including disabled children need lifesaving equipment which is powered by electricity in order to survive- this includes ventilators, feeding pumps, electric wheelchairs, and stair lifts. Energy prices have soared, and we have no options but to pay these costs. For disabled people this is the real cost of living.

At the same time, in June 2023, the Trussell Trust's *Hunger in Northern Ireland* revealed that nearly two thirds of people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network were disabled. It said that while 30% of people in NI "meet the Equality Act 2010 definition of disability", that percentage is much higher-- 55%-- amongst people experiencing food insecurity. The report added, "the most significant cause of the financial insecurity driving the need for food banks is the design and delivery of the social security system" (p. 14). It also drew attention to barriers to employment:

> despite reductions over the last decade in the disability employment gap, disabled people referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland are still far less likely to be in work than non-disabled people, with one in eight (12%) in work compared to over one in four (28%) of non-disabled people. As is the case among parents and carers, disabled people often work part-time in order to help manage their health condition, but this too tends to restrict them to lower-paid jobs such as

[6] Department for Communities response to NI Assembly AQW 36841/22-27 from Mark Durkan (SDLP, Foyle), 7 January 2026 (https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/search.aspx).
[7] Department for Communities response to NI Assembly AQW 33531/22-27 from Mark Durkan (SDLP, Foyle), 4 December 2025 (https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/search.aspx).

care work, sales and customer service and other types of leisure and service work (p. 49).

More recently, Trussell Trust's March 2026 report noted (p. 35) that disability remained the most common factor underpinning food bank use in Northern Ireland in 2024; while 34% of the NI population as a whole were living with a disability, this was true of 79% of people referred to Trussell foodbanks.

1c. Solutions that are having an impact in NI

NI has a thriving grassroots network of community organisations, communal gardens and other community-based initiatives doing important grassroots work around food and land justice. For the most part these are not supported by local or regional duty bearers.

The organisations behind this joint submission support each other's work, and several involve local schools and youth groups. Gairdín an Phobail, with the support of Grow NI, regularly hosts groups from local Irish language schools to get the children involved in growing, and it hosts classes from St. Claire's primary school on a weekly rotation at Forthspring Inter-Community Group in West Belfast. Together with Grow NI, GAP has hosted a pilot scheme to distribute Source Grow's food boxes with produce from local growers over the last year and held joint Feirm an Phobail (People's Farm) events connecting growers with local residents. The organisations also support tree planting and a tree nursery of indigenous trees as part of local efforts to rewild Belfast's (currently largely deforested) Black Mountain.

For participants in GROW NI's workshops, what has worked particularly well includes:

- Joining community gardens to learn how to grow foods in this climate and get a share of the produce.
- Joining Anaka Women's Collective and initiatives like the #KindEconomy campaign[8]- a homegrown, solidarity-based network in NI in counterbalance to the UK Home Office's hostile environment policies which includes people with experience of the asylum system alongside around 90 NI businesses and civil society groups[9]- that at .times accesses the garden spaces for solidarity events.
- Eating more vegetable protein and reducing meat: because it's cheaper to eat vegetarian food and, for Muslim participants, they can be sure it is halal
- Food sharing with others – community gatherings, neighbours, family.
- Grow some of our own food at home, even if outdoor space is tiny – can grow herbs and greens.

[8] https://www.nlb.ie/blog/270/kind-economy-2025-deepening-kindness-and-solidarity; for more information see https://www.nlb.ie/blog/79/2022-09-theres-lots-cooking-in-the-kind-economy-kitchen

[9] See *inter alia* Anaka Women's Collective and PPR (2023), Empty Chairs: accountability in the UK's immigration system, 9 May 2023. Available at: https://www.library.nlb.ie/book/15.

GAP and Grow NI's work with local schools, at GAP and at Forthspring Inter Community Group, is entering its fifth year and has helped introduced a swathe of local children to the joys of being outside, getting dirty, understanding where food comes from and beginning to grow food themselves. It has involved them with rewilding the local mountain and has helped to connect them to their home areas in new and important ways.

GAP has also developed links with international agri-ecological movements in Brazil, the USA, Guatemala, Scotland and Palestine, hosting visitors and community events to promote understanding of common concerns and struggles.

Anaka, Grow NI, PPR and GAP have all joined to support the Take Back the City campaign for social housing at the Mackie's site, a 25-acre publicly owned piece of land that has been derelict for the past 20 years in the area of highest housing need in the north[10]. The winner of an international design competition on the site incorporated an ecovillage with up to 725 new homes, a city farm and allotments alongside 18,000 sqm of employment space. This ongoing effort has helped to highlight the interconnectedness of the rights to an adequate standard of living, to housing and to food. Local schoolchildren – many of them from families in housing need – have been involved over the years in rewilding and de-toxifying the land, which formerly housed a foundry; in recent months they have built the first 'home' on the site, out of traditional materials including willow and clay.

[10] See film at https://www.nlb.ie/video/52/video-2021-12-home-baile

2. What should the right to food law include?

While we found it important to set NI food poverty in its context in this input, reform to agricultural policy per se is beyond our expertise; we would like to reiterate though that NI's context (food poverty within a heavily agricultural -- though corporatised and export driven – region) may well require tailored and targeted reforms.

As community-based organisations, our input focuses primarily on the **community level aspects** of a right to food law and is grounded on the evidence presented above.

Our recommendations for components of the right to food law include:

Objective need based support to at risk communities to address food poverty

- This should be co-designed to ensure the support meets the needs of the target group. It could include law-based mechanisms for: support to local community-oriented growers of healthy food; training and skill-sharing in foraging, growing, composting, cooking, preserving, collecting seeds; support for communal cooking, co-operatives and community gardens, markets and farms; promotion of local organic greengrocers

- Legally-mandated allocation of resources for communities to help them break from the current corporate-driven food cycle through mechanisms like farmers' markets, organic food distribution hubs, cooking lessons with home grown produce, etc. This should include resources for shared learning from other communities

Changes to public land access and use:

- Legal provisions laying the groundwork for concrete initiatives to use suitable public and community land (including schools, leisure centres, health centres and other publicly owned land) for growing and farming. The authorities should be required by law produce a map of all local public land suitable for community growing and make this land available for cultivation by a simple licence to community organisations at no cost.

Changes to the education system and curricula:

- The Education Authority should be required to assist primary and secondary schools in identifying, preparing and maintaining areas of their school grounds for growing and planting out as part of school activities
- Educational authorities should be required to expand primary and secondary school curricula to include practical growing experience as a means of promoting future food security and sovereignty; and to establish mechanisms (and allocate resources) for links between schools and local community gardens and growing groups to help facilitate and embed this education.

Changes to housing practice:

- The law should mandate an end to the practice of placing impoverished and homeless families in emergency accommodation without access to kitchen facilities

Changes to asylum accommodation practice:

- The law should require tangible improvements in access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food in asylum accommodation and improved accountability mechanisms for residents to raise issues around food, nutrition and health

Introduction of a formal 'right to grow' on suitable publicly owned land:

(In November 2023 Belfast City Council passed a landmark motion on the right to grow on council-owned land. Plans for a feasibility report were announced and a related mapping exercise was said to inform Belfast Food Partnership's draft Sustainable Food Strategy.)

- The law should require local authorities to enshrine a 'right to grow' on suitable publicly owned land (via local regulation or other) and to build on this step with concrete measures to identify plots (at schools, health centres, community centres, leisure centres), make them available to local residents and groups and encourage public access. The law should further require local authorities to explore mechanisms whereby community groups can (a) access straight-forward, zero-cost leases that protect their Right to Grow and (b) bid for land to grow should the authority decide to sell it

Seed sovereignty

- The law should require relevant departments / local councils to support community groups and individuals to gather, protect and distribute native/naturalised seeds and

should commit to only sourcing such seeds themselves in order to protect our native ecosystem.

Mainstreaming of community growing within Council

- The law should mandate mainstreaming the focus on community food growing within relevant regional and local strategies and actions plans (eg around climate change, biodiversity, wellbeing); and within planning policies, guidance and frameworks
- The law should facilitate and promote initiatives like the recent motion from independent Belfast City Councillors Paul Doherty and Paul McCusker calling for a requirement for developers to include community food growing mechanisms in certain residential planning applications. The motion will be going before Council's Planning Committee for approval shortly.

So that the authorities more fully understand the difficulties communities are facing, we also call more broadly for the following:

Changes to data collection:

- The law should provide for collection of detailed, disaggregated data on food insecurity, in order to inform policy. This should include dedicated monitoring of food access, affordability and related issues amongst the vulnerable groups described above (residents of areas with multiple deprivations; people with experience of the asylum system; homeless people in emergency accommodation without kitchen access; households including someone living with a disability)